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Perfect Weddings Abroad

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Authors and Contact Information:

Bridget Major

Principal Lecturer and Programme Director

Address: Newcastle Business School
City Campus East
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 3ST
United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)191 227 4955
Fax: +44 (0)191 227 4190
Email: bridget.major@northumbria.ac.uk

Professor Fraser McLeay

Professor of Marketing

Address: Newcastle Business School
City Campus East
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 3ST
United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)191 227 3932
Fax: +44 (0)191 227 4190
Email: fraser.mcleay@northumbria.ac.uk

Danny Waine

Marketing Director

Address: Perfect Weddings Abroad

Perfect Weddings & Honeymoons
15 High Street, Chasetown,
Burntwood, Staffs
WS7 3XE
Telephone/Fax 0844 770 8270
Email: danny@perfectweddingsabroad.co.uk

Biographical note

Bridget Major is a Principal Lecturer and Programme Director in Marketing Travel and Tourism Management (MTTM) at Newcastle Business School (NBS) and has extensive senior level travel industry experience. Fraser McLeay is Professor of Marketing at NBS and Leader of the MTTM Group. Danny Waine is Marketing Director of Perfect Weddings Abroad.

Key words

Experience, Innovation, Service Marketing, Social Networking, Weddings Abroad.

Abstract

Approximately sixteen percent of UK couples are currently married abroad. However, academic or practitioner focussed research that explores the complex nature of a couple's buying preferences or the development of innovative marketing strategies by businesses operating within the weddings abroad niche sector, is almost non-existent. This exploratory paper examines the role and relevance of marketing within the weddings abroad sector. The complex nature of customer needs in this high emotional and involvement experience, are identified and explored. A case study of Perfect Weddings Abroad Ltd highlights distinctive features and characteristics. Social networking and the use of home-workers, with a focus on reassurance and handholding are important tools used to develop relationships with customers. These tools and techniques help increase the tangibility of a weddings abroad package. Clusters of complementary services that are synergistic and provide sources of competitive advantage are identified and an agenda for future research is developed.

Introduction

The weddings abroad sector is booming. A recent report by Mintel (2008) suggests that one in six (16%) British weddings now take place abroad. With an estimated market value of £333 million in 2008, this equates to approximately 51,300 overseas weddings - a massive 43% increase since 2003. However, no academic research has examined buyer preferences and businesses marketing activities within this growing sector. Current and emerging constructs in the international service marketing, strategic and marketing management, experiential marketing and travel and tourism literature may not capture the complex nature of consumer's buyer behaviour or marketing management strategies developed by service providers in the weddings abroad industry.

Their wedding is arguably one of the most important experiences in any individual or couple's life. Selecting an international destination or location and service provider to "package" the bundle of services associated with an international wedding is therefore a high-involvement decision making process. Service providers can help simplify the purchasing decision by booking travel and accommodation, recommending wedding locations, assisting with legal wedding documents and addressing other international factors such as fluctuating exchange rates.

This is an exploratory paper. As no academic literature has been identified which relates to the topic specifically, the authors have reviewed marketing, travel and tourism management literature with a view to assessing its relationship and transferability to this niche service. Within international service marketing literature, research efforts have studied the internationalisation of service providers (Javalgi and Martin, 2007), the determinants of export performance across service types (La et al. 2005), and the factors that influence international market entry by service firms (Sanchez-Peinado et al. 2007). However, the role that service providers play in providing a high involvement service in a new international setting has not been specifically examined.

Research published in the Journal of Vacation Marketing has established that the level of involvement with the purchase decision influences the type of information travellers seek (Cai et al. 2004). Clearly, an overseas wedding is a high involvement decision entailing risk and as such lends itself well to technology and web marketing. The function that technology can provide in assisting travel and tourism operators to develop sources of competitive and promotional strategies has been highlighted by Buhalis (2003) while the 'Long Tail' phenomenon of utilising the web for niche products and the growing diversification of holiday destinations has been illustrated by Anderson (2008). The growing popularity of the blog on the internet demonstrates that this is perceived as a highly credible medium for consumer opinion (Schmallegger and Carson 2008, Mack et al. 2008). Mac et al. (2008) point out that the role of blogs in tourism marketing communications strategy has not yet been determined. With regards to promotion and distribution, social networking sites have been shown to provide travel companies with many of the benefits that consumers seek; such as better brand awareness, more customer insight, more traffic and more content (Hatch, 2008). Global consumers spent more than five hours on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in December 2009, an 82% increase over the previous year (Nielson, 2010). *'More marketers are recognising the opportunities for developing closer relationships with their customers and building trust and advocacy through social media'* (Econsultancy, 2009). Fuller et al. (2007) highlight *'the need for improved strategic management processes as a fundamental means of better identifying strategies for enhancing consumer satisfaction'* in the tourism sector.

Emerging experiential marketing literature has illustrated the role that experiential marketing can play in promoting a place or developing a brand (King, 2002; Mitchel and Orwig, 2002), influencing the consumption process of tourists (McIntyre, 2007) and how managing the experience is integral to the service product (Pine and Gilmore 1998 and 2002; Williams 2006). The 'Extraordinary Experiences Conference', in Bournemouth (2007) brought together contemporary theory and practice on the advancement of the management of consumer experience in hospitality, leisure, sport, tourism, retail and events (Jackson, Morgan and Hemmington 2009). The seminal research conducted by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), Pine and Gilmore (1998, 2002) and Schmitt (1999) has resulted in a plethora of research on the

concept of the service experience (Arnould and Price 1993, Otto and Ritchie 1996, Holbrook 2001, Ryan 2002, Wickens 2002, Williams 2006, Morgan and Watson 2007, 2009, Morgan and Xu 2009). Richie and Hudson (2009) make a valuable contribution in a review of the current literature available in this growing and diverse field.

In the strategic marketing literature, the contribution service quality makes to business performance has been examined in depth. Specifically, the 'ServQual' model has been widely adopted in investigations of travel and other sectors (Parasauraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, Parasauraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991, Hope and Muhlemann, 1997, Palmer, 1994). The ServQual model was originally developed to conceptualize and measure service quality and identify gaps between managers and consumers expectations of service. It has been criticized because few authors have validated its use as measuring tool before using it (Nyeck et al. 2002). Lovelock (1996) developed a 'Flower of Service Model' model that groups services into clusters of overlapping supplementary services that surround a core product or service. Although the original model identified 8 service clusters, these can be adapted to meet market needs, expectations and competitive dynamics (Lovelock, 1999). As such this model provides a useful framework for use in this study. Naipaul and Parsa (2000) investigate Lovelock's model in the tourism industry and conclude that the framework can help tourism operators identify the services that differentiate them from competitors and may led to superior performance.

Within tourism management literature, the factors that affect tourists purchase involvement (Cai et al. 2004) or more specifically, influence a couples' choice of honeymoon destination have been examined (Jang et al. 2007; Kim and Agrusa, 2005). While these articles provide useful contributions to helping understand factors that influence international travel marketing experiences, they may not capture the complexity of a consumer's buying decision in the weddings abroad market. Leisure travel products and services consist of several components including travel, accommodation and leisure. Their multi-faceted and intangible nature makes it complex for consumers to pre-evaluate them (Walsh and Gwinner 2009). The case of Perfect Weddings abroad examined in this instance, is an example of a service provider who compiles all the elements including the wedding experience offering, and through innovative marketing

strategies attempt to address the problems related to intangibility. As stated earlier, a literature review carried out by the authors of this paper did not identify any academic papers that focused on service provider's marketing strategies or consumer's buyer behaviour in the weddings abroad industryⁱ.

This paper seeks to readdress this apparent imbalance, and to examine and assess the role and relevance of marketing within the weddings abroad sector. Specifically, the objectives are:

- To identify the drivers of the weddings abroad sector and provide an overview of the trends in destination and venue choice;
- To define customer needs for both traditional UK weddings and weddings abroad;
- To develop a case study of one award winning business (Perfect Weddings Abroad) that illustrates the innovative and differentiating promotional strategy which has been developed to make weddings abroad packages more tangible through the use of social networking and homeworkers;
- To utilize the case study to illustrate the unique strategies and clusters of services that Perfect Weddings Abroad has developed to satisfy customer needs and explore the role that this service provider plays in achieving a high involvement service.

In the sections that follow, each of these areas is addressed in turn, before conclusions are developed and areas for future research identified. This paper is exploratory in nature and therefore attempts to identify and understand key constructs, rather than develop or test new models or make generalisations. A case study of one innovative award winning business (Perfect Weddings Abroad) is used to explore the marketing strategies that they utilize in depth. Considerable input has also been gained from the Marketing Director of Perfect Weddings Abroad who is a co-author of this paper. The focus is on the UK consumers and therefore the definition of abroad is outside the UK. The honeymoon market is excluded from discussionⁱⁱ.

2. Key Drivers of Sector Growth and Current Trends in the Weddings Abroad Sector

Weddings abroad now account for a sizeable proportion of UK marriages and the industry has seen an average 10% growth per annum since 2003 (Mintel, 2008). As illustrated in Figure 1, the percentage of couples getting married abroad is expected to increase to almost 18% by 2013. The market has several segments which are performing well and are growing. These are presented in Table 1. Each segment has specific features and motivations that influence the purchase of an overseas wedding. For example, those customers requiring a renewal of vows ceremony will generally not have the lengthy lead in period associated with a first timer's wedding. If the extended family is attending, the location may be closer to home (i.e. Europe as opposed to a long haul possibility for other types of ceremony).

Figure 1: Number of Weddings Abroad as a Percentage of Total Weddings

Table 1: Market Segments in the Weddings Abroad Market

The key drivers and characteristics of the weddings abroad sector are identified in Figure 2. They are extensive and varied as a result of the high emotional investment in the purchase and the variety of service elements which make it up. A fuller discussion of the drivers follows.

Figure 2: The Weddings Abroad Sector

It is argued that lower costs are one of the reasons behind the growth of the married abroad market. The average UK wedding, including a honeymoon, was estimated to cost £20,273 in 2008 (Mintel, 2008), and couples often weigh this up against the increasing cost of other significant expenses, such as a mortgage on a property. The average estimated cost of a wedding abroad package including transport, accommodation and honeymoon, was £6,500 in 2008 (Mintel, 2008). In Figure 3 the breakdown of average costs for hosting an overseas wedding is illustrated.

Figure 3: Breakdown of per Couple Costs for a Wedding Abroad

As illustrated in Figure 4, expenditure on weddings abroad has risen significantly since 2003, as has the cost of hosting weddings overseas. However, this cost remains minimal compared to the approximate £ 20,000 for a traditional wedding in the UK. One of the main reasons for costs

being significantly less for hosting a wedding overseas is the fact that numbers attending it are considerably smaller than had it been held in the UK. The cost of the reception is therefore significantly less. Couples can feel that attending weddings abroad is onerous on friends and family in terms of finance and time and this is one of the less appealing aspects of getting married abroad. It is therefore also one of the challenges that organisers and package providers seek to address. There are clearly many lucrative opportunities for businesses if groups can be encouraged to follow the wedding entourage overseas.

Figure 4: Estimated Value and Average Cost of the Weddings Abroad Market

The UK climate is a driver of overseas weddings where destinations like Cyprus for example can provide guaranteed sunshine for much of the year. For 'white weddings'ⁱⁱⁱ Austria is a popular choice.

The full impact of the current economic crisis on the weddings abroad sector is not fully known. However, evidence suggests that this is one of the very few sectors in the travel industry which in 2009 remains buoyant on account of the potential savings on hosting a wedding overseas. Wills from Virgin Holidays comments *'travellers saying "I do" – add the weddings and honeymoons market to those areas still holding their own.....I'm pleased to report that romance at least is not dead'* (Wills, 2009). In an increasingly uncertain economic environment, when people are concerned about jobs, marriage could be considered to offer safety and security.

There is no doubt that organising and hosting a wedding is a stressful experience for brides, grooms to be, and close family, not merely in terms of the considerable financial outlay. It is also for this reason that most couples seek a less stressful option, the use of a specialist overseas wedding provider who will take care of all essential arrangements within a package.

2.1. Trends in Destination and Venue Choice for Weddings Abroad.

The weddings market is split approximately 60/40 between short haul and long haul trips (Mintel 2008). There is therefore a stronger pre-disposition towards long haul packages than the more traditional holidays which still favour short haul. Destinations such as the Caribbean, Maldives,

Mexico, Mauritius and South Africa are core long haul honeymoon destinations which have absorbed some of the wedding market. These core destinations also have legal, cultural and linguistic frameworks which facilitate a straightforward experience and pre wedding residential requirements tend to be shorter (usually 3 days or less). The Maldives does not actually legally permit overseas weddings; however, operators have been reporting an increase in demand for combination wedding/honeymoons in Sri Lanka and the Maldives (Mintel, 2008).

Interestingly the leading British holiday destinations, Spain and France do not feature prominently in the overseas wedding market. This is mainly as a result of particularly stringent residential, medical and administrative requirements (Mintel, 2008). These countries are clearly missing out on a market with excellent potential, not least because of their geographical proximity to the UK market which would keep product costs down. Cyprus, the Greek Islands and Italy have proven themselves well in the romance stakes and are constant favourite destinations for weddings abroad.

The emerging pattern however, is one of continual innovation in terms of both destinations and the wedding package on offer. This reflects on the increasing numbers of more experienced travellers, who are prepared to be more creative and innovative in their choice of destination and experience. Reports of 'Love in a Cold Climate' (Mintel 2008) and 'White Weddings' (Ranson, 2008) abound. Trade press such as Travel Weekly and Travel Trade Gazette have recently featured substantial coverage of weddings taking place in destinations such as Austria, Iceland and Lapland. Cruise weddings are also increasing in popularity, particularly with older, second or third timers as evidenced in the travel trade article entitled '*Weddings and Honeymoons – all aboard*' (Booth, 2008). The innovation and diversification of the wedding abroad product appears to be limitless, with venues in iconic buildings and locations such as Table Top Mountain, Cape Town, on top of the Empire State Building, New York, underwater and even in outer space. *"Travel experimentation and a taste for more exotic cultural, landscape and gastronomic experiences are factors helping to boost the weddings and honeymoons abroad market* (Mintel, 2008). Opportunities for host destinations and service providers are therefore excellent.

Operators have realised the opportunities in the marketplace for wedding packages and consumers have been quick to recognize the benefits of using the services of specialist operators in selecting a package which meets their requirements in terms of additional service elements as well as destinations and venues. Service providers are attempting to satisfy customer needs. These needs are identified and described in the section that follows.

3. Methodology

In this paper, the results from a review of the service marketing and other relevant literature are used to provide a theoretical backdrop and illustrate the gaps that exist. It is emphasised that this is an exploratory study that aims to explore sector drivers, define customer needs, and illustrate the marketing approach that has been developed by one business. Rich, thick, descriptive data is therefore sought (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, King 2004) and a qualitative research strategy with an inductive view is adopted. The findings are written up as a single case study which is a vehicle suitable for examining one organisation in detail as a 'revelatory' case (Silverman 2008; Yin 1984; Stake 1995 cited in Bryman and Bell). The organisation Perfect Weddings Abroad (PW) is chosen to provide an example of an innovative approach to business development and marketing within the weddings abroad sector. It is anticipated that the results will be transferred and used as a basis to undertake a larger study with more mainstream wedding operators and consumers in the future.

Content analysis of the transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted with the travel management team from PW is used to identify manager's perceptions of client needs as well as explore the innovative approach that has been used to develop and promote PW. The preliminary results of the customer needs analysis has been shared with ten academics that teach travel and tourism management at UK Universities while they were attending an academic conference. Their input used to help further develop and refine the results. The Flower of Marketing Service (Lovelock, 1999) is used as a framework to identify and illustrate the specific types of or clusters of services that differentiate PW from competitors and the integration that exists between the different types of services provided by PW.

4. Customer Needs: The Weddings Abroad Package

Results presented in Table 2 identify customer needs from the perspective of both a UK wedding and a wedding hosted overseas. Although there are clear similarities and overlap between the needs of couples getting married domestically and abroad (for example: coordination, registrar, venue, and the provision of tangibles such as flowers and a cake) those marrying abroad have more extensive requirements. These are mainly in the form of organisation and assistance – for example travel organisation (including financial protection), assistance with the administration required in gaining a marriage licence and appropriate legal documentation, help with booking the reception, and assistance in translation. Underlying all of these service provisions is the need for reassurance, that everything will be as perfect as possible. Much of the emphasis on ‘reassurance’ stems from the fact that a couple have ostensibly ‘handed over’ the organisation of their wedding to a specialist, and, that it is being organised from afar.

Table 2: Wedding Customer Needs

An overseas wedding package is an example of a niche and innovative product that offers many developed and enhanced service elements well beyond those contained in the basic package holiday. As evidenced in Table 2, customer needs are extensive for both weddings at home and abroad. Fuller et al. (2007) comment that in the travel industry *‘the consumer has a higher chance of being “delighted” by a product offering if it is augmented.’*

Augmented products^{iv} are where basic services are supplemented by tangible support service as well as added value in terms of reliability, responsiveness, quality, and other higher level service elements. (Kotler and Keller 2006, Middleton 2001, Levitt, 1974). The core of the wedding abroad package however retains traditional features that rely on the strength of the concept of the package holiday; Mintel (2008) comment *‘the added complexity of the (weddings abroad) product calls on the core strengths of the package holiday: re-assurance, organisation, expertise, protection.’* This has resulted in the overseas wedding market being largely untouched by independent travellers and dynamic packaging (i.e those increasing numbers of

customers who are comfortable putting together their own package, and also those travellers who use an agent to put together a dynamic package^y). There are therefore substantial and arguably largely sustainable opportunities for travel agents or other service providers. They are likely to utilise their core skills to provide packaged service offerings that meet even the most complex of customer needs. An example of one service provider and the promotion and service marketing strategy they have developed for serving customers in the weddings abroad market follows.

5. Perfect Weddings and Honeymoons Ltd Case Study

Perfect Weddings and Honeymoons Ltd (PW) is a small specialist business that has capitalized on opportunities that exist in the weddings abroad market place. This case study illustrates the innovative and differentiating promotional strategies that PW have developed. The business utilizes social networking and homeworkers to make the weddings abroad packages more tangible for consumers and provide crucial reassurance.

PW was launched in Spring 2005 by Helen Doyle, a self-taught travel agent who had built up homeworking experience in organising weddings abroad. In Spring 2006 she was joined by Danny Waine as a partner of the business. Danny had spent his work placement year from Newcastle Business School at Planet Holidays in London. Much of Planet's core business is weddings and honeymoons and Danny gained extensive experience of the industry and gained valuable contacts during this time. The company was initially a small travel agency high street outlet, with membership of The Travel Trust Association, serving the local community in Chasetown and Burntwood (Staffordshire). In December 2005 a change in the law led to the introduction of same-sex Civil Partnerships in the UK which provided PW with opportunities for growth. PW launched PerfectGayHoneymoons.co.uk, the first on-line travel agency aimed at this new market in early 2006.

By late 2006, PW had picked up its first award the "Midland Weekly Media, Small Business of the Year Award". During 2006/07 the business grew steadily, despite being only a summer operation. Recognition within the travel trade was growing and Helen and Danny were finalists

in the Travel Trade Gazette “Specialist Agent” and “Young Agent” of the Year Categories at the 2007 TTG Awards.

In late 2008 Helen and Danny entered the “TTG Big Idea Competition”, with a business plan focusing on launching a niche weddings abroad tour operation which would sell direct to the public and to the travel trade. PW was selected by a prestigious “Dragon's Den” of travel chief executives^{vi} who invested a total of £100,000 in the winning business. They also agreed to provide guidance and expertise on the expansion of the product as part of the winning package. With their mentoring, PW joined the Hays Travel Independence Group consortium, which has improved commercial terms for PW as well as their brands, Perfect Gay Honeymoons and Perfect Weddings and Honeymoons Ltd. Perfect Weddings Abroad now operates under the Hays Travel ATOL licence. In Spring 2009 PW launched two new websites and expanded the head office team.

In the summer of 2009 PW expects to launch Travel Perfection, a general travel brand, consisting of an online travel agency which enables customers to book online whilst speaking via a chat facility to one of its ‘Travel Perfectionists.’ By 2010, PW plans to organise over 150 weddings abroad in a wide-range of locations; with approximately 3,000 passenger guests.

PW has developed an innovative and successful promotional strategy that has incorporated:

- Social networking

Facebook and other social networking sites have enabled couples to interact and stay in touch with PW. This assists over the long booking lead times which can be up to 3 years prior to a wedding. Social networking enables the couple getting married to develop a relationship with PW and assists in fending off competitors. It can turn couples into advocates for PW before they even get married abroad.

- Speed

Social networking allows PW to be reactive to the market in terms of special offers. In addition, feedback to customers can be delivered in a timely manner.

- Utilizing IT to access new market segments

PW utilizes technology to access new market segments that have been traditionally regarded as difficult to reach. Many young people do not utilize traditional distribution mediums such as telephone, travel agents or tour operators to book a wedding abroad. They are more comfortable with booking through web sites with linked social networking sites complimenting an internet booking model.

- Traditional promotional channels

PW also utilizes traditional promotional mix channels such as advertising in newspapers. Print advertisements are mainly focused on bridal magazines and luxury travel or gay magazines. In partnership with E-bay PW has offered an experimental platform to ascertain whether couples would like to buy a 'Wedding Only' service as an add on to their holiday. Participating at local and national wedding trade shows has increased brand awareness and enabled customers with opportunities to interact face to face with PW staff.

- Homeworking

Homeworking is ideally suited to the nature of the service for both local and national potential customers. The 'reassurance' element is particularly strong, which is important, given the high spend and emotional elements of a weddings abroad purchase. PWs homeworking team is set to grow to over 10 members by the end of 2009. Homeworkers are encouraged to use their photographs in advertising and use a local rather than a national phone number to develop more of an affinity between a sales person and potential customers. This provides reassurance that PW staff are 'just around the corner.'

- Competitions

Competitions have been run through Wedding TV offering a free wedding abroad. These promote PW to a wider audience and capture data on many couples who may

wish to get married in the future. Another benefit is that the winning couple's guests often book travel and accommodation with PW.

- Online advertising

Online marketing including the use of sponsored advertisements on Google are used to attract targeted enquiries. Advertising on related sites such as bridal dress and suit hire companies are also effective.

- Blogs

PW uses blogs online to help convey positive messages, often with the help of company testimonials. For example: 'Sarah and Ben got married in Iceland – read their story.' Blogs have also been used to proactively manage crisis including competitors failing^{vii} and Swine-flu. They provide the important re-assurance to customers that it is still safe to get married overseas. Finally, they enable the business to take advantage of happy couples who have married overseas to encourage repeat bookers.

In this paper, Lovelock's 'Flower of Service Model' is used as a framework to explore the services PW has developed in an effort to satisfy customer needs. As illustrated in Figure 5, eight overlapping and complementary clusters of services are utilized by PW. In combination, these clusters are synergistic and help differentiate PW from competitors such as Virgin Holidays and Thomas Cook. They also provide PW with sources of competitive advantage. Information presented in Table 3, enables the reader to compare and contrast the findings of this study with the Lovelock (1999) and Parasarrum et al (1991) models. Although some of the elements such as care-taking/in report focus are unique to the weddings abroad sector and PW, most others overlap and identify strongly with the Servqual criteria for measuring service quality and Lovelock's supplementary services.

Figure 5: PW's Flower of Marketing Service. Source: Adapted from Lovelock, C. (1999)

Table 3: Model Comparison

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided an exploratory analysis of the growing weddings abroad sector. A review of statistics illustrated growth in the demand for weddings abroad and compared expenditure with traditional weddings in the UK. A discussion of trends and factors highlighted popular overseas destinations and innovative wedding venues. The drivers behind hosting a wedding abroad were briefly discussed against the background of the complex nature of the product/service offering and purchasing decisions and wedding customer needs were identified. Consumer needs for hosting a wedding abroad are more extensive than those for domestic weddings, in terms of their requirements, with the provision of 'reassurance' underlying many of them.

A case study of Perfect Weddings Abroad Ltd, an award winning specialist operator highlighted the distinctive features and characteristics of the business. The complimentary services surrounding PW's core product/service were identified. These make up the augmented product and provide sources of competitive advantage that differentiate PW from competitors. The company's innovative approach to distribution with a focus on reassurance and 'hand holding' was also highlighted. Waine (2008) Marketing Director of Perfect Weddings Abroad states: *'It is imperative nowadays that you have multi-channel distribution; there's certainly no one-size-fits-all, particularly in the weddings market.'*

The case study illustrates that new, contemporary, promotional strategies incorporating social networking are particularly successful in meeting several service and communication needs such as addressing the intangibility of the product/service. This fully reflects existing literature. Similarly, homeworking is another tool which has also been found to be particularly effective. Existing theories and models provide a useful theoretical framework for exploring consumer behaviour and analysing marketing and promotional strategies in the weddings abroad sector. However, it is recommended that the role that providers play in the delivery of complex, sophisticated service products with high emotional involvement and associated consumer needs, requires further in depth exploration. This was an exploratory study and the

opportunities for further research into this specialist service, and others, are therefore considerable. The following agenda for future research has been identified:

- As data was only collected from one specialist organisation and interviews of academics, there is clearly a need to expand or replicate this study to include consumers and case studies of several large service providers;
- Consumer preferences and business strategies should be empirically tested through quantitative surveys. The results of these could be used to develop and test new models that describe consumer and business behaviour in this specialist industry and others as well as measure customer feedback on the overseas wedding experience and the degree to the experience met their expectations; and
- Research that explores how service providers in the travel and tourism industry select international destinations and partners is recommended. Although an examination of these constructs was not an implicit objective of this study, ancillary information collected as a result of this research identified this as a priority area for future investigation.

In conclusion, this paper has addressed a gap in academic research by exploring customer needs and marketing strategies in the rapidly growing weddings abroad sector. An objective for this inductive study was to obtain rich, descriptive data and develop a case study of one award winning specialist operator. A clear overlap with elements of Servqual and Lovelock's Flower of Service model were evident, although the flower of marketing service model developed by PW for weddings abroad retains complete distinctiveness. The results have implications for both marketing academics and practitioners. It is anticipated that this study will form the backdrop for future research with both larger operators and a large sample of consumers.

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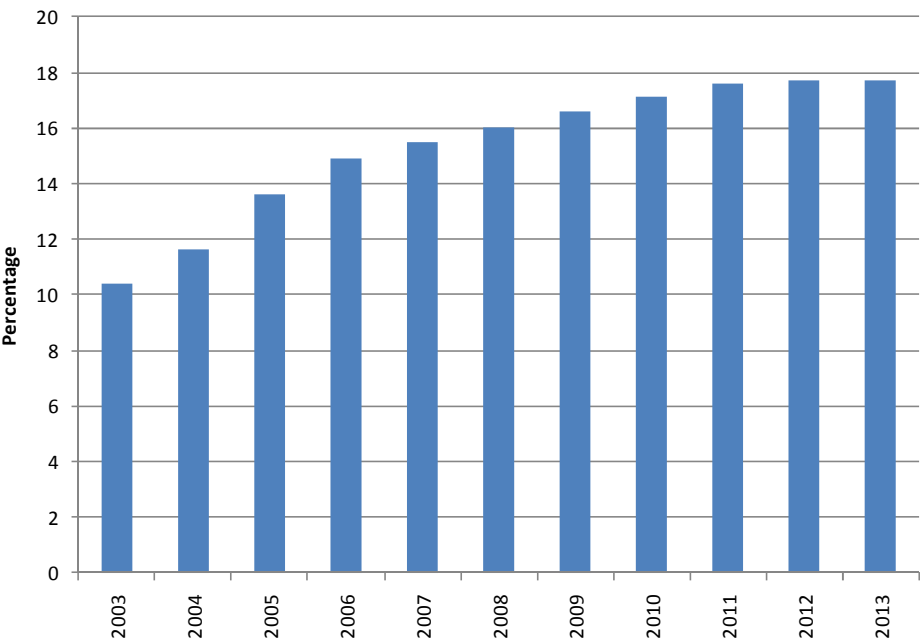
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Figure 1: Number of Weddings Abroad as a Percentage of Total Weddings



Source: Adapted from Mintel (2008)

Table 1: Market Segments in the Weddings Abroad Market

Weddings Abroad Market Segments	Features
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Re-marriages	The core market. Having experienced a traditional wedding the first time, they opt for a wedding abroad with less guests in attendance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First time marriages	Couples are experienced travellers and seeking an innovative wedding in terms of destination and willingness to experiment. For example with venues and Catholic and Anglican worshipers having traditional ceremonies in either purpose built chapels attached to hotel grounds, e.g. Elysium Hotel, Cyprus or ancient churches, e.g. Pauls Pillar, Cyprus.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Same sex marriages and commitment ceremonies	The Civil Partnership Act (December 2005) has provided a boost to same sex weddings. Most popular destinations include Canada, New Zealand, Vermont, South Africa and Grand Canaria, as they offer legalised partnership packages.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Renewal Vows	People are now living longer and want to celebrate their marriage again, in a different setting, from 1 st time around with sons, daughters and grandchildren. Renewal vows are increasingly popular.

Figure 2: The Weddings Abroad Sector

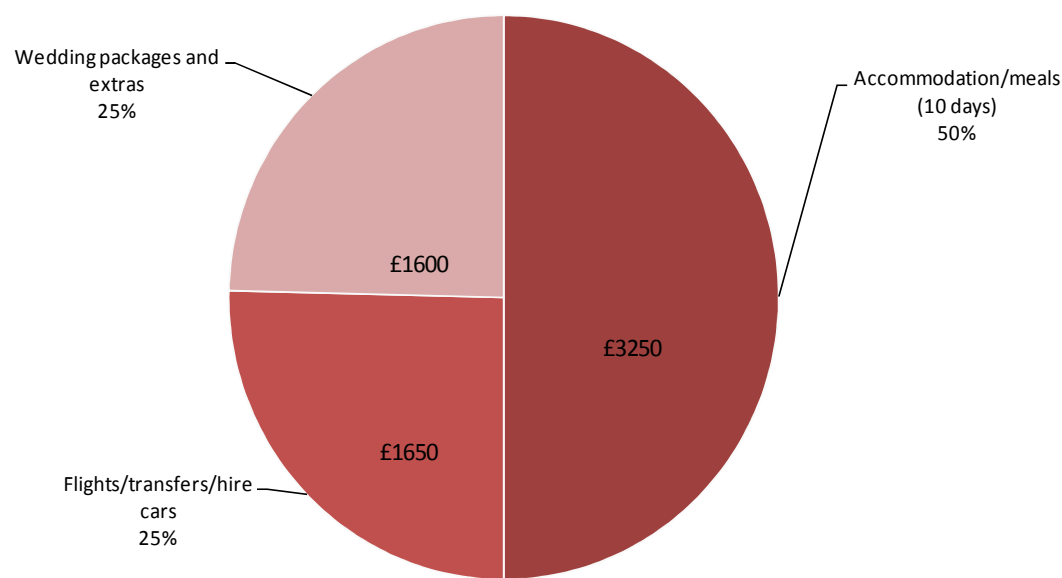
KEY DRIVERS OF SECTOR GROWTH

- Increasing cost of domestic weddings
 - Decreasing cost and frequency of international flights
 - Increasing availability of packaged wedding holiday travel organizers
 - Increasingly experienced travellers seeking high level experience
 - Choice of destinations is increasing
 - It is increasingly acceptable to get married away from friends and family.
 - Weddings away from a church are increasing.
 - Increasing emphasis on experience and opportunities for getting married in unusual/memorable setting.
- For example:
- Horse drawn sleigh
 - On skis
 - Under the sea
 - Guaranteed sunshine
 - Iconic Weddings e.g. Table Mountain, Top of Empire State Building
 - Popular Culture/Superstars such as Wayne Rooney and Colleen getting married in Italy
 - Peer to Peer sharing of information via internet, facebook etc
- Reduction of stress associated with traditional wedding
 - Emergence of new market segments. For example:
 - Civil Ceremonies
 - Second and third marriages
 - Gay Marriages
 - Global recession brings focus on cost savings

Characteristics of Weddings Abroad

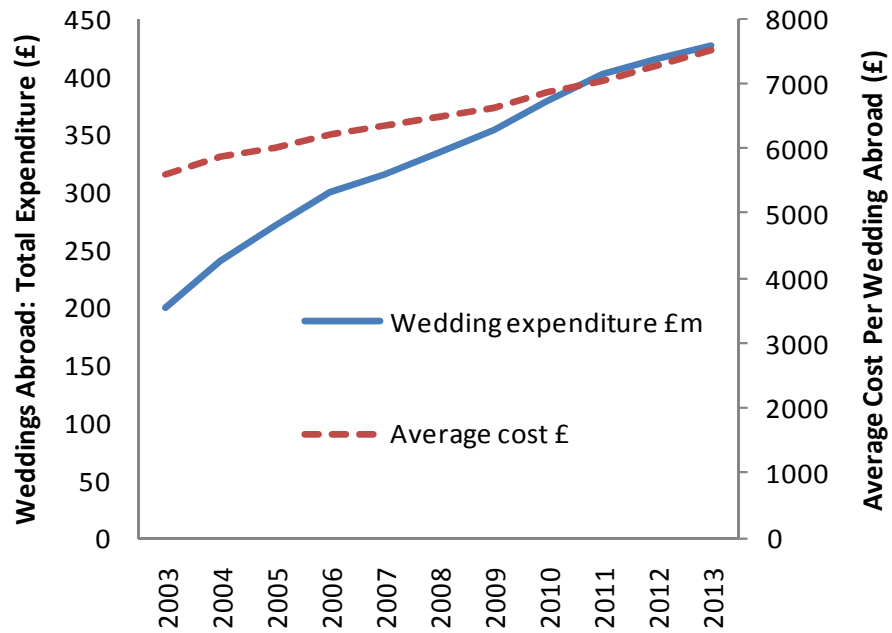
- A complex purchasing decision with benefits associated with many different service elements
- Quality of the service product and its provision is of the utmost importance
- Quality and reliability of all elements of the experience is fundamental
- Long lead in time from booking to wedding
- High emotional investment in purchase

Figure 3: Breakdown of per Couple Costs for a Wedding Abroad



Source: Adapted from Mintel (2008)

Figure 4: Estimated Value and Average Cost of the Weddings Abroad Market

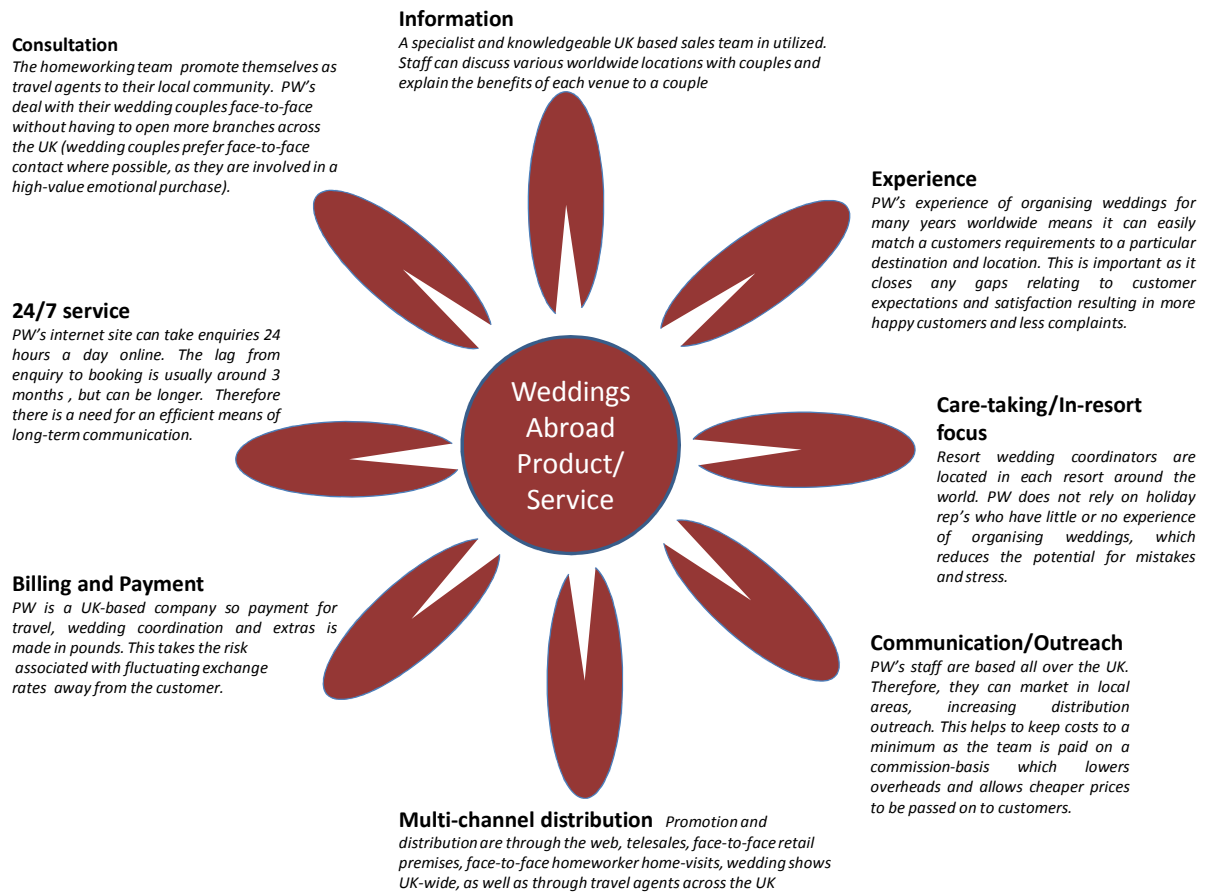


Source: Adapted from Mintel (2008)

Table 2: Wedding Customer Needs

<p>Domestic Wedding Customer Needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Wedding Coordination ♥ Registrar to conduct wedding/perform ceremony ♥ Venue for wedding and reception ♥ Visiting venue on many occasions to check-out the location ♥ Venue large enough to host large groups, often 100+ ♥ Wedding planner to coordinate (<i>optional</i>) ♥ Catering requirements for a large group ♥ Reasonable costs <i>UK-suppliers are usually relatively expensive</i> ♥ Tasting sessions of the food to sample what will be served on the day ♥ Wedding Extras – <i>transport, flowers, cake, photographs, make-up, hair etc.</i> 	<p>Wedding Abroad Customer Needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Travel Coordination - <i>Travel arrangements all organised in conjunction with the wedding</i> ♥ Registrar to perform ceremony ♥ Paperwork/admin to obtain marriage licence ♥ Setting up of ceremony (flowers, chairs etc) ♥ To see the image of the location (<i>photographs more than just a brochure</i>) ♥ Reassurance that everything will be 'perfect' ♥ Possibly visit the venue once before departing from the UK (<i>but only around 5% of couples do this</i>) ♥ Financial protection of the company they're booking with ABTA & ATOL ♥ Wedding coordinator in resort – not simply a Holiday Rep ♥ Smaller Venue required – typical short-haul wedding party 40 ppl, long-haul 20 ppl ♥ Help with booking local reception venue, eg, Taverna, local restaurant which requires specialist knowledge and first-hand experience ♥ Costs not getting out of control as suppliers often charge in local currency ♥ Legal documentation guidance (different for every location) ♥ Translation of documents and the ceremony itself in some destinations ♥ Sample menus in advance of the wedding to see what is available for the day ♥ Wedding Extras – <i>transport, flowers, cake, photographs, make-up, hair etc.</i>
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Figure 5: PW's Flower of Marketing Service



Source: Adapted from Lovelock, C. (1996)

Table 3: Model Comparison

<u>PW's Flower of Marketing Service</u> (this paper)	<u>Flower of Service</u> Lovelock (1999)	<u>ServQual</u> Parasarrum <i>et al.</i> (1991)
Information Consultation 24/7 Service Multi-channel distribution Communication/outreach Experience Care-taking/in resort focus Billing and Payment	Information Consultation Order-taking Hospitality Caretaking Exceptions Billing Payment	Reliability Assurance Tangibles Empathy Responsiveness

ⁱ However, Johnson (2006) examines the role of wedding tourism in New Zealand, but does not focus on the consumer buyer decision process. In trade publications, Hurley (2008) examines the impact of an increase in same-sex marriages in California

ⁱⁱ Whilst the honeymoon is clearly inextricably linked to weddings, and of fundamental importance to the travel industry, a discussion of honeymoons is beyond the scope of this paper. The honeymoon extends the period in the resort and economic benefits for both organisers and destinations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that although the vast majority of those opting for overseas weddings will honeymoon in the same destination, however this is not always the case.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'White' refers to the snow, not the colour of the dress.

^{iv} Reisinger (2001) refers to augmented product as a 'potential product' that consists of service offerings of features and benefits that may be of use to travellers (i.e. everything that can professionally be provided for the product).

^v This is when various elements such as travel and accommodation are put together but purchased from separate sources and not a single tour operator.

^{vi} The 4 industry Dragons and investors were Terry Fisher CEO Goldmedal Travel, Steve Endacott, CEO On Holiday Group, Simon Powell CEO Comtec and David Speakman CEO Travel Counsellors

^{vii} For example XL Leisure Group and Whitehall Leisure.